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ABSTRACT

This case study was undertaken in order to discover if there are different types of policy language, and, if so, to describe relationships betweeen policy language types and policy implementation. Content analysis of three drafts of the state educational policy, "Standards for Approving Vermont's Public Schools," demonstrated the presence of three types of policy language: philosophical (which describes a goal), professional (which describes the desired output of an activity), and prescriptive (which mandates an activity or stipulates certain conditions). During the policy making process, individuals and interest groups attempted to influence policy by shifting statements from one language category to another. Content analysis revealed random discrepancies between the approved policy and regulatory guidelines. Policy language type had minimal impact during policy implementation by school personnel, unless significant implementation conditions were present. For external evaluators, however, policy language type evoked differential responses. The study concludes that policy detached from the conditions for implementation is not likely to be reflected in school practice. (TE)

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THE LANGUAGE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF STATE EDUCATIONAL POLICY

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for:

American Educational Research Association

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ABSTRACT

The research problem for this case study was to discover if there were different types of policy language, and, if so, to describe any relationships which might exist between policy language types and policy implementation. Content analysis of three drafts of the state educational policy, "Standards for Approving Vermont's Public Schools," demonstrated the presence of three types of policy language: philosophical, professional and prescriptive. Philosophical language describes a goal; professional language describes the desired output of an activity; and prescriptive language mandates an activity or stipulates certain conditions of an activity. During policy making, individuals and interest groups attempted to influence policy by shifting policy statements from one language category to another. Content analysis revealed random discrepancies between the approved policy and regulatory guidelines. Policy language type had minimal impact during policy implementation by school personnel. Few conditions promoting policy implementation were present. However, conditions promoting implementation were present for external evaluators. Policy language type did have an impact during this stage of implementation. This study concluded that three policy language types were present in the selected policy. Furthermore, policy language type affected implementation when significant implementation conditions were present, and, in the absence of these conditions, language type did not affect implementation. It was noted, finally, that policy making occurred in an arena in which policy makers assumed that policy language was significant and that a tight relationship existed between language and implementation.

The literature on policy implementation over the past fifteen years includes at least three critical themes: the lack of control over the implementation process (Elmore, 1978), the gap between policy makers and policy implementors (Wise, 1979), and the need for theoretical and practical change in the policymaking system (Berman, 1981). Concurrent with these criticisms of the policy process is the expanded state activity in educational policy making.

However, neither the increase in policy making nor the increase in criticism has addressed directly the role of policy language. This is surprising since it is policy language which permeates the policy process--from policy making, to implementation, to evaluation.

Two major themes emerged from the policy implementation literature regarding policy language: first was the need for policy clarity, and second were hypotheses relating general or specific policy language to implementation. Rein and Rabinovitz (1978), Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) and Schneider (1982) discussed policy clarity as one essential condition for effective implementation. However, while Rein and Rabinovitz, for example, claimed that "legislation can be classified in terms of how clear it is about what it wants to accomplish," no classification of policy language was found.

Berman (1980) in his theory about programmed and adaptive implementation referred to ambiguous policy goals and specific policy goals. Some problems with adaptive implementation

occurred because of "overspecification and rigidity of goals." Adaptive implementation might succeed when there are "rules that allow multiple participants to bargain and compromise."

Like Montjoy and O'Toole (1979), Berman implied that policy language could be identified as general or specific, and that each language type had some relationship to policy implementation. The assumption was that general and specific policy language contained characteristics which determined the potential degree of discretion for policy implementors.

From these two themes in the literature came two questions which drove this case study: first, were there functional categories of policy language (beyond vague and specific), and second, if language categories existed, were there any relationships between these categories and policy implementation.

The Policy

The policy studied was "Standards for Approving Vermont's Public Schools," adopted by the Vermont State Board of Education in 1984. The 21 pages of policy statements included standards for graduation requirements, school leadership, academic and vocational subjects, facilities and more. The policy meant to be comprehensive and was one of the State's responses to statewide and national calls for educational improvement.

Description of a Language Typology

Analysis of early policy drafts, interviews with policy makers, and observations during policy making meetings led to the hypothesis that three types of policy language existed.

Construction of the three categories was completed by following guidelines suggested by content analysts (Stone et. al., 1966; Holsti, 1969). The three language types were:

1. Philosophical: described a general goal;
   difficult to measure or observe reliably at a specific time and place;
   required interpretation at implementation site;
   required broad-based personnel support.

   Example: "Students have a genuine opportunity to complete an elementary and secondary program of studies and to receive a diploma."

2. Professional: described the desired output of an activity;
   relied upon qualitative methodology to evaluate compliance;
   variety of local methods developed to achieve desired output;
   required support of a group within the school.

   Example: "The school's curriculum is coordinated with sending and receiving schools."

3. Prescriptive: mandated a specific activity or conditions of an activity;
   could be measured or observed reliably at a specific time and place;

statement specificity limited degree of local adaptation;
personnel responsibility was narrow and identifiable.

Example: "All teachers and staff are certified to teach or provide services in the areas to which they are assigned."

Five sections of the policy were studied: general academic requirements, school climate, language arts, mathematics, and staff development. The unit of analysis, for applying the language category criteria, was the sentence. The five sections of policy contained 79 sentences:

Philosophical	9
Professional	33
Prescriptive	37

Policy Implementation

Three Vermont high schools participating in the school approval process were chosen for this study. High school personnel, predominantly teachers, responded to the policy statements in a written self-assessment comparing their school to the standards outlined in the policy. Two months after this, teams of educators (trained by the Vermont Department of Education) visited the schools for three days to compare the schools to the policy standards, and then wrote evaluation reports.

Two types of data were collected during implementation: data from the self-assessment and visiting team documents, and data describing the procedural context for the two activities--gathered by interviews and observations of key events at the schools.

Document Analysis

Three meta-matrices, described by Miles and Huberman (1984) as "master charts (for) assembling descriptive data from each of several sites in a standard format," were used to assist in document analysis. One meta-matrix was developed for each of the three policy language types. Each line of cells in a matrix contained:

1. Policy sentence
2. School #1 response to the policy sentence. The response was labelled in one of three ways:
   a. stating compliance
   b. stating non-compliance
   c. not addressing the policy statement
3. School #2 response
4. School #3 response
5. Visiting team #1 response
6. Visiting team #2 response
7. Visiting team #3 response

(same range of responses as #2)

These matrices yielded the following numerical data:

LANGUAGE TYPE	3 SCHOOLS' RESPONSES	3 VISITING TEAMS' RESPONSES
Philosophical (9)		
Compliance	19	17
No Response	8	9
Non-Compliance	0	1
Professional (33)		
Compliance	62	30
No Response	35	30
Non-Compliance	2	39
Prescriptive (37)		
Compliance	69	23
No Response	29	37
Non-Compliance	13	51

This data revealed significant discrepancies between the schools' self-assessments and the visiting teams' evaluations. Regardless of language type, schools most often declared themselves in compliance with policy statements. Visiting teams, however, most often declared schools to be non-compliant. Two questions emerged:

1. What accounted for the dramatic differences between the schools' responses and the visiting teams' responses?
2. Why did language type not seem to affect school personnel writing the self-assessment, while it did seem to affect visiting team members (i.e the more prescriptive the

policy statements, the more frequent the findings of non-compliance)?

It was hoped that interviews and observations of school personnel and visiting team members during implementation would provide some answeers to these questions.

Procedural Analysis

Review and coding of interview and observation notes suggested the importance of eight conditions for implementation:

1. decision to participate in the approval process;
2. time available to implement policy;
3. familiarity with policy;
4. familiarity with, and access to, data sources;
5. ability to accelerate implementation process;
6. audience identification;
7. local leadership;
8. perceived significance of incentives/disincentives;

These eight conditions were related to the six implementation variables most often mentioned in the literature as variables which can lead to successful implementation (Berman, 19808; Montjoy and O'Toole, 1979; Rein and Rabinovitz, 1978; Sabatier and Mazmanian, 1980; Schneider, 1982; Van Meter and Van Horn, 1975):

1. clarity of the policy;
2. characteristics of the implementing organization;
3. disposition of the implementors;

4. characteristics of interorganizational relationships;
5. level of available resources (including capacity);
6. degree of environmental stability ("social, economic, and political conditions within the implementing organization's jurisdiction," (Van Meter and Van Horn, 1975).

There was a marked absence of key implementation variables during the compilation of data and the writing of the self-assessments, while there was an evident presence of these variables throughout the activities completed by the visiting teams. The chart below synthesizes data collected from the interviews and observations:

IMPLEMENTATION VARIABLE	SCHOOLS	VISITING TEAMS
1. Clarity of policy	Major problem	Minor problem
2. Characteristics of the implementing organization	Major problem	Major asset
3. Disposition of the implementors	Major problem	Major asset
4. Characterisitics of the interorganizational realtionship	Problem	Minor asset
5. Level of available resources	Major problem	Minor asset
6. Environmental stability	Problem	Major asset

Conclusions

This study had five conclusions:

1. Three functional categories of policy language existed in "Standards for Approving Vermont's Public Schools": philosophical, professional and prescriptive.

2. In the absence of significant conditions (variables) promoting implementation, policy language type was not significant for school personnel. These individuals did not choose to participate in the approval process, possessed few resources to complete implementation, maintained significant control over their involvement in implementation, perceived few incentives, had minimal concerns about potential disincentives, and questionned the goals of the policy. Within this context, any assumed link between language type and policy implementation was not justified.

3. Given the presence of many significant implementation variables, language type itself was significant. Visiting team members responded differently to each type of policy language because they chose to participate, were provided sufficient resources, and thought they were providing an essential service to the schools. Within this context, policy language type mattered. However, it must still be noted that more than one-third of all policy statements still were not addressed by the visiting teams or the schools.

4. Interest groups--including the Vermont Department of Education--acted during policy making and policy implementation

on the assumption that policy language was signficant and that a tight relationship existed between language and implementation. Representatives of school administration supported language which was philosophical and opposed prescriptive policy statements. Even though many administrators might have supported the content of a prescriptive policy statement (such as lower student-teacher ratios), they opposed the statement because of the implied loss of local control to set that ratio. At issue was not the content of the statement, but the implied state/local relationship.

Most representatives of teacher and staff organizations supported professional and prescriptive language. They were less concerned about the state/local relationship and, in fact, often considered the state as a potential change agent at the local level. Teachers and staff were more concerned with the immediate gain (lower class size) than the implied state/local relationship.

However, it is important to reiterate that representatives from all interest groups assumed that how each policy statement was written would affect policy implementation. As content analysis of the schools' self-assessments demonstrated, that assumption was not totally correct. Policy makers debated policy within the traditional, "rational," policy model. This model assumed the presence of meaningful links (variables) between policy makers and policy implementors (i.e. the state and the schools), and that policy debated and adopted would be implemented in good faith.

5. Policy detached from the conditions for implementation is

not just poor policy, but can become symbolic policy--policy which can subvert a public policy process by creating a policy making arena in which actors make policy for personal gain, political legitimation (Weiler, 1981), or public consumption (Edelman, 1977). It is policy which will not affect the supposed implementation sites as publicly declared, and thus reveals the depth of the chasm separating policy makers from policy implementors, and the supposed beneficiaries of the original policy (Wise, 1979).

Final Note

This research contains the inherent limitations of most case studies, i.e. studies which are context-dependent. As Mishler (1979) has noted, the problem is "how can we formulate generalizations that make explicit the context-dependence of relationships?" It is hoped that the development of this policy language typology, and these early analyses, will promote further testing of the role policy language plays in the entire policy process--from policy making, through implementation, to evaluation.

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